

Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

AP Lit.

Ms. McCord

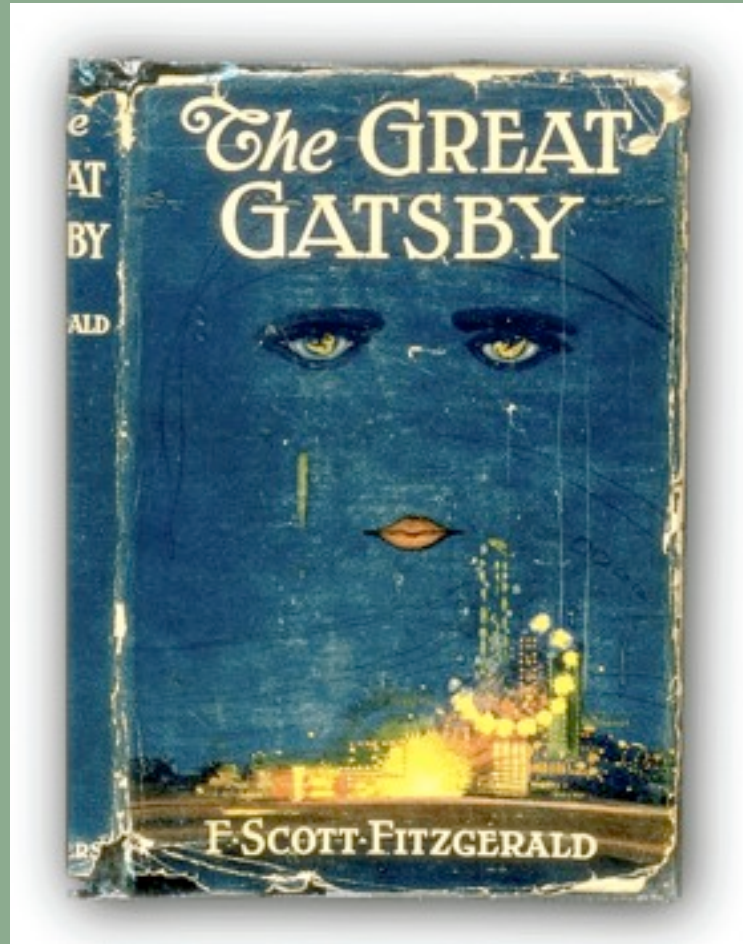


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1. Modernism & the Modern Novel:


- The term modernism refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post-World War One period.
- The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not, wrote T.S. Eliot, accord with "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."
- Modernism thus marks a distinctive break with Victorian bourgeois morality; rejecting nineteenth-century optimism, they presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. This despair often results in an apparent apathy and moral relativism.



- Modernist writers, in their attempt to throw off the aesthetic burden of the realist novel, these writers introduced a variety of literary tactics and devices.
- Modernism is often derided for abandoning the social world in favor of its narcissistic interest in language and its processes.
- Recognizing the failure of language to ever fully communicate meaning ("That's not it at all, that's not what I meant at all" laments Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock), the modernists generally downplayed content in favor of an investigation of form.
- The fragmented, non-chronological, poetic forms utilized by Eliot and Pound revolutionized poetic language.



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- Modern life seemed radically different from traditional life -- more scientific, faster, more technological, and more mechanized. Modernism embraced these changes.
 - Technological innovation in the world of factories and machines inspired new attentiveness to technique in the arts. To take one example: Light, particularly electrical light, fascinated modern artists and writers. Posters and advertisements of the period are full of images of floodlit skyscrapers and light rays shooting out from automobile headlights, movie houses, and watchtowers to illumine a forbidding outer darkness suggesting ignorance and old-fashioned tradition.
 - Vision and viewpoint became an essential aspect of the modernist novel as well. No longer was it sufficient to write a straightforward third-person narrative or (worse yet) use a pointlessly intrusive narrator. The way the story was told became as important as the story itself.



■ Henry James, William Faulkner, and many other American writers experimented with fictional points of view (some are still doing so). James often restricted the information in the novel to what a single character would have known. Faulkner's novel The Sound and the Fury (1929) breaks up the narrative into four sections, each giving the viewpoint of a different character (including a mentally retarded boy).

■ To analyze such modernist novels and poetry, a school of "new criticism" arose in the United States, with a new critical vocabulary. New critics hunted the "epiphany" (moment in which a character suddenly sees the transcendent truth of a situation, a term derived from a holy saint's appearance to mortals); they "examined" and "clarified" a work, hoping to "shed light" upon it through their "insights."

2. Features of Modernism:

(according to Marjorie Perloff, "Modernist Studies," in Redrawing the Boundaries, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992, p.158)


1. The replacement of representation of the external world by the imaginative construction of the poet's inner world via the mysterious symbol.
2. The superiority of art to nature.
3. The concept of the artist as hero.
4. The autonomy of art and its divorce from truth or morality.
5. The depersonalization and "objectivity" of art.
6. Alogical structure
7. The concrete as opposed to the abstract, the particular as opposed to the general, the perceptual as opposed to the conceptual.
8. Verbal ambiguity and complexity; "good writing" as inherently arcane.
9. The fluidity of consciousness (or stream of consciousness)
10. Increasing importance attached to Freudian unconscious and to the dream work.
11. The use of myth as organizing structure.
12. The emphasis on the divided self, on mask vs. inner self.
13. The malaise of the individual in the "lonely crowd," the alienated self in the urban world, the "Unreal city" of the Waste Land or Ulysses.
14. The internalization of modernism: free flow of ideas all over the world.





3. Gatsby and the Modern Novel:

- Fitzgerald left the Victorian era behind, creating a Modernist masterwork that still serves as a model for American fiction.
- The gritty realism of William James and his contemporaries, and even the lighthearted tone of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, was too limited to allow Fitzgerald to portray the Jazz Age, a period in which dark fantasy reigned. Modernism offered a broad palette, a self-conscious surreal landscape in which life is viewed more metaphorically than meticulously detailed. Only through this lens could a central theme of the novel emerge.





 All of Gatsby's characters, human and nonhuman, participate in Modernism's open examination of such American institutions as industry, power and class, and their by-products. Gatsby's open critique, already in use by poets of the time, is the most blatant, yet beginning an almost century-long tradition of social commentary in American literature.



The Great Gatsby sets the tone for literature to come in its blending of various post-19th century ideas into what would become known as Modernism and its offshoot, Postmodernism. Fitzgerald, influenced by the social and artistic changes going on all around him, developed a vision that has persisted into fiction of the 21st century; his concerns are our concerns, and American life has changed little from Modern to Postmodern. Only the terms have changed. In defining what fiction could become, *Gatsby* is as important today as in 1926 as an example of what Modernist literature can, and still does accomplish.



4. The Life and Times of F. Scott Fitzgerald:

- Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, now regarded as the spokesman for the “Lost Generation” of the 1920s, was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1896. His childhood and youth seem, in retrospect, as poetic as the works he later wrote. The life he lived became “the stuff of fiction,” the characters and the plots a rather thinly-disguised autobiography. Like Jay Gatsby, the title character of his most famous novel, Fitzgerald created a vision which he wanted to become, a “Platonic conception of himself,” and “to this conception he was faithful to the end.”
- Fitzgerald was educated at parochial prep schools where he received strict Roman Catholic training. The religious instruction never left him. Ironically, he was denied burial in a Catholic cemetery because of his rather uproarious lifestyle which ended in depression and alcoholism. In the fall of 1909, during his second year at St. Paul Academy, Fitzgerald began publishing in the school magazine. Sent East for a disciplined education, he entered The Newman School, whose student body came from wealthy Catholic families all over the country. At The Newman School he developed a friendship and intense rapport with Father Sigourney Webster Fay, a trustee and later headmaster of the school and the prototype for a character in *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald’s first novel, published in 1920.





Upon his grandmother's death, Fitzgerald and the family received a rather handsome inheritance, yet Scott seemed always to be cast into a society where others enjoyed more affluence than he. However, like Gatsby, a self-made man, Fitzgerald became the embodiment of the American Dream—an American Don Quixote.




Thanks to another relative's money, Fitzgerald was able to enroll in Princeton in 1913. He never graduated from the Ivy League school; in fact, he failed several courses during his undergraduate years. However, he wrote revues for the Triangle Club, Princeton's musical comedy group, and "donned swishy, satiny dresses to romp onstage" alongside attractive chorus girls. Years later, after enjoying some literary fame, he was asked to speak at Princeton, an occasion which endeared the school to him in new ways. Today, Princeton houses his memoirs, including letters from Ernest Hemingway, motion picture scripts, scrapbooks, and other mementos.





He withdrew from Princeton and entered the war in 1917, commissioned a second lieutenant in the army. While in Officers Candidate School in Alabama, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, a relationship which is replicated in Jay Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and her fascination with a military man. He never made it to the European front, but he did come to the attention of New York publishers by the end of the war. Despite Zelda's breaking their engagement, they became re-engaged that fall. Their marriage produced one daughter—Scottie, who died in 1986. In 1919 his earnings totaled \$879; the following year, following the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, an instant success, his earnings increased to \$18,000.





By 1924 it was clear that Fitzgerald needed a change. He, Zelda, and Scottie moved to Europe, near the French Riviera, where he first met Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton. Before long, Zelda met and had an affair with Edouard Josanne, a relationship which Fitzgerald at first ignored but ultimately forced to a showdown. His writing may have profited because of her affair—according to biographer Andrew Turnbull, Fitzgerald's jealousy “sharpened the edge of *Gatsby's* and gave weight to Tom Buchanan's bullish determination to regain his wife.”

To increase earnings he wrote some 160 short stories for magazines, works which, by his own admission, lacked luster. After Zelda's alcoholism had several times forced her commitment to an institution, Scott went to Hollywood to write screenplays, and struggled unsuccessfully to complete a final novel, *The Last Tycoon*. He died in December of 1940 after a lifelong battle with alcohol and a series of heart attacks.



As early as 1920, Fitzgerald had in mind a tragic novel. He wrote to the president of Princeton that his novel would “say something fundamental about America, that fairy tale among nations.” He saw our history as a great pageant and romance, the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream—and, he wrote, “If I am at the end of it that too is a place in the line of the pioneers.” Perhaps because of that vision, he has been called America’s greatest modern romantic writer, a purveyor of timeless fiction with a gift of evocation that has yet to be surpassed. His works reflect the spirit of his times, yet they are timeless.



One cannot fail to notice how much of himself Fitzgerald put into all his work; he spoke of writing as a “sheer paring away of oneself.” A mélange of characters replicate or at least suggest people in his acquaintance. *Gatsby* seems almost to be an existential extension of Fitzgerald’s posture, a persona created perhaps as a premonition of his own tragic end.




The almost poetic craftsmanship of Fitzgerald’s prose, combined with his insight into the American experience, presented an imperishable portrait of his age, securing for him a permanent and enviable place in literary history.



5. Introduction to The Great Gatsby:

- In 1925, *The Great Gatsby* was published and hailed as an artistic and material success for its young author, F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is considered a vastly more mature and artistically masterful treatment of Fitzgerald's themes than his earlier fiction. These works examine the results of the Jazz Age generation's adherence to false material values.
- In nine chapters, Fitzgerald presents the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby, as related in a first-person narrative by Nick Carraway. Carraway reveals the story of a farmer's son-turned racketeer, named Jay Gatz. His ill-gotten wealth is acquired solely to gain acceptance into the sophisticated, moneyed world of the woman he loves, Daisy Fay Buchanan. His romantic illusions about the power of money to buy respectability and the love of Daisy—the "golden girl" of his dreams—are skillfully and ironically interwoven with episodes that depict what Fitzgerald viewed as the callousness and moral irresponsibility of the affluent American society of the 1920s.





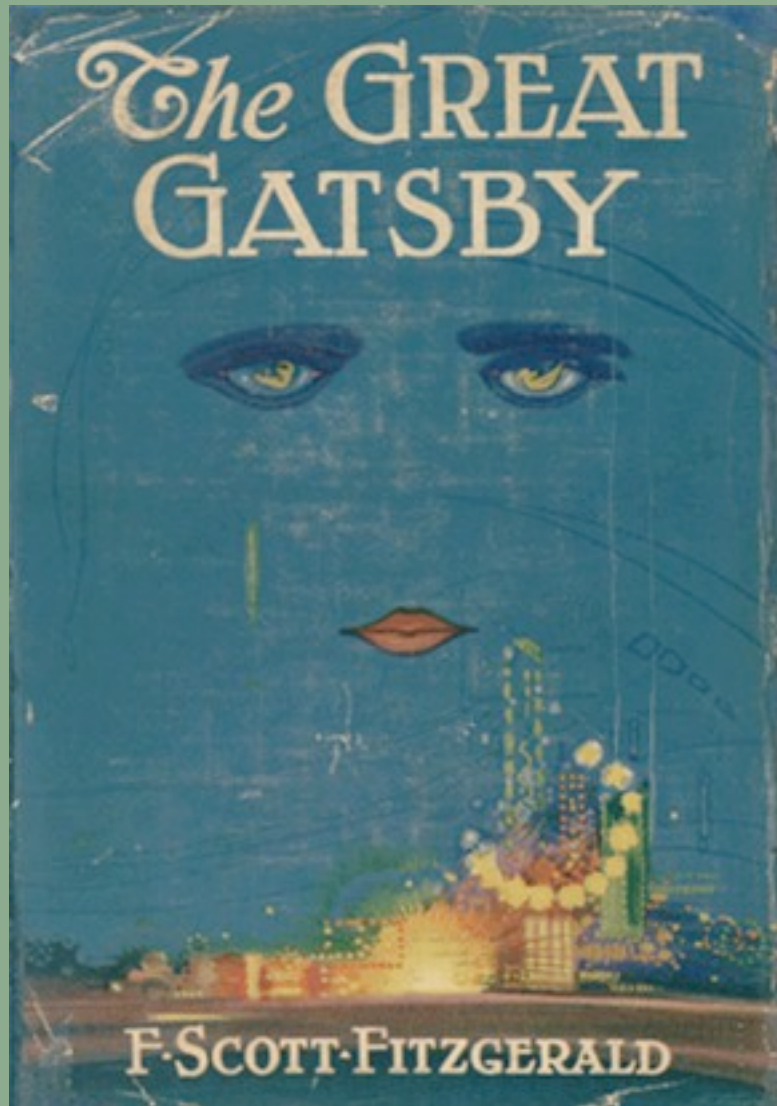
■ America at this time experienced a cultural and lifestyle revolution. In the economic arena, the stock market boomed, the rich spent money on fabulous parties and expensive acquisitions, the automobile became a symbol of glamour and wealth, and profits were made, both legally and illegally. The whirlwind pace of this post-World War I era is captured in Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, whose tragic quest and violent death foretell the collapse of that era and the onset of disillusionment with the American dream.

■ By the end of the novel, the reader slowly realizes that Carraway is transformed as he recognizes Gatsby's moral superiority to the Buchanans. In fact, the triumph of Gatsby's legacy is reached by Nick Carraway's ruminations at the end of the book about Gatsby's valiant, however futile, attempts to regain his past love.




The discrepancy between Gatsby's dream vision and reality is a prominent theme in this book. Other motifs in the book include Gatsby's quest for the American Dream; class conflict (the Wilsons vs. the Buchanans and the underworld lowbrows vs. Gatsby); the cultural rift between East and West; and the contrast between innocence and experience in the narrator's life. A rich aesthetic experience with many subtleties in tone and content, this novel can be read over and over again for new revelations and continued pleasure.






■ The doubleness of Fitzgerald's personality melds successfully in this short novel, the subject of which is the American dream: the rise above poverty to wealth and the winning of a love.





Nick Carraway, from the Midwest, tells of coming east and meeting the fabulously high-living and mysteriously wealthy Jay Gatsby, who is in love with Nick's cousin, Daisy Buchanan.



Ultimately, Nick leaves the East to return to the Midwest. The book closes with Nick's mournful, ecstatic meditation on America and its promises.



6. The American Dream and The Great Gatsby:

- The American Dream is the idea held by many in the United States of America that through hard work, courage, and determination one can achieve financial and personal success. These were values held by many early European settlers, and have been passed down to subsequent generations.
- What the American dream has become is a question under constant discussion, and some believe that it has led to an emphasis on material wealth as a measure of success and/or happiness.
- The American dream is a concept that permeates our culture and unifies us all as Americans despite our racial, religious, and socio-economic diversity. This dream also serves to connect us to our nation's historical past as well as to the generations of the future.



Origins of the American Dream:

- European explorers and the Puritans—
Doctrine of Election and Predestination
- The Declaration of Independence—life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
- American Revolutionary War—promise of
land ownership and investment
- Industrial Revolution—possibility of anyone
achieving wealth & the nouveau riche
- Individualism and self-reliance
- Westward expansion and the Gold Rush
- Immigration



🎨 Prolific dime novel writer Horatio Alger, Jr. became famous for his novels that idealized the American Dream. His rags-to-riches stories glorified the notion of the down-and-out who were able to achieve wealth and success and helped entrench the Dream with the popular culture.





🌿 Near the 20th century, major industrialist personalities became the new model of the American Dream, many beginning life in the humblest of conditions, but later controlling enormous corporations and fortunes. Perhaps the most notable her were the great American capitalists Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. This acquisition of wealth demonstrated to many that if you had talent, intelligence, and a willingness to work hard, you were likely to be a success as a result.






- Whilst *The Great Gatsby* explores a number of themes, none is more prevalent than that of the corruption of the American dream.
- Gatsby appears to be the embodiment of this dream – he has risen from being a poor farm boy with no prospects, to being rich, having a big house, servants, and a large social circle attending his numerous functions. He has achieved all this in only a few short years, having returned from the war penniless.
- However, Gatsby is never truly one of the elite – his dream is just a façade.
- However, Fitzgerald explores much more than the failure of the American dream – he is more deeply concerned with its total corruption. Gatsby has not achieved his wealth through honest hard work, but through bootlegging and crime. His money is not simply ‘new’ money – it is dirty money, earned through dishonesty and crime. His wealthy lifestyle is little more than a façade, as is the whole person Jay Gatsby.
- The society in which the novel takes place is one of moral decadence. Whether their money is inherited or earned, its inhabitants are morally decadent, living life in quest of cheap thrills and with no seeming moral purpose to their lives. Any person who attempts to move up through the social classes becomes corrupt in the process.



- Like one of Horatio Alger's novels Gatsby is a self-made man, springing from "his Platonic conception of himself," beholden to no one.
- In the final pages of the novel, the sweep of American history is alluded to in the landscape itself, as Nick is about to leave Long Island. The fresh, virginal country that "Dutch sailors" first saw is evoked, reinforcing the magic of the American promise. This promise has been tragically betrayed. The ideals that give meaning to American life are illusions, but Americans strive for them anyway and doing so gives them tragic grandeur.
- Its form, its satisfying complexity, its deft selection of detail, its great natural appeal, and its concision make *The Great Gatsby* one of the definitive statements of the American myth.



7. Sources:

-  www.bookteacher.org (Thanks, Platt!)
-  Lathbury, Roger. American Modernism (1910-1945). New York: Facts on File, 2006.
-  Gay, Peter. Modernism: The Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2008.

